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ABSTRACT

A study investigated the experience of midcareer adults in self-directed graduate programs. It explored two questions in the researcher's personal experience: as a learner, what caused the researcher's change in learning-orientation from goal- to learning-oriented and, as a teacher, could the researcher justify using both self- and teacher-directed learning techniques? Literature in two fields was reviewed: adult development and self-directed learning. A heuristic approach involved two sets of interviews, one with learners in two self-directed graduate programs and another with program graduates. The first round of interviews used a general interview guide approach that explored general issues. The second round sought to discover how learners articulate their perspective and get their unique educational stories. Findings revealed three motivations for adults to enroll in formal educational programs: learning for career advancement or training needs, learning for interpersonal effectiveness, and learning for the sake of learning. The majority of participants were motivated by their career goals. Midcareer adults had various educational needs. A continuum of educational needs was revealed: technical training, interpersonal development, and personal growth through transformative learning. All learners had all three needs--it was the emphasis that varied throughout adulthood. Different teaching methods were appropriate at different points on the continuum. (Contains 23 references) (YLB)

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MID-CAREER ADULTS IN SELF-DIRECTED GRADUATE PROGRAMS

Michael A. Beitler

The purpose of my research was to investigate the experience of mid-career adults in self-directed graduate programs. My interest in this topic is rooted in my own experience.

At the age of thirty-eight, after practicing as a CPA for sixteen years, I had a transformative learning experience in a self-directed M.A. program. I was transformed from a goal-oriented learner (learning for career advancement) to a learning-oriented learner (learning for the sake of learning). What caused this transformation? Was my transformation the result of the properly-structured environment of self-directed learning, as suggested by Knowles (1975)? Or, was it simply an inevitable change in adult developmental stages due to my increasing chronological age, as predicted by Levinson (1978)?

My transformation also raised questions about my work as a teacher of mid-career adults. I was using self-directed learning principles (i.e. allowing learners to choose discussion topics) in some classes, and using a teacher-directed style in other classes. Could I justify self-directed learning in some classes and teacher-directed learning in others?

Thus, I had two questions. As a learner, what caused my change in learning-orientation? As a teacher, could I justify using both self-directed and teacher-directed learning techniques?

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REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

The nature of my questions required a review of the literature in two fields: adult development and self-directed learning. I will begin by summarizing the literature on adult development.

The theories on adult development can be classified into three basic models:

a) trait models - in which patterns of individual differences in behavior are seen as being constant over time (exemplified by Allport's theory),
b) stage models - in which development is represented by patterned or predictable change over time (exemplified by the theories of Erikson and Levinson),
c) interactional models - in which development is the result of interaction among age-related, cohort/history related, and non-normative life events (exemplified by the work of Neugarten and Schlossberg).

Trait Models of Adult Development

Supporters of the trait (or stability) models of adult development use trait theory to support their beliefs. Trait theorists believe traits (friendly, aggressive, or intelligent) account for the consistency in human behavior. The leading trait theorist, Gordon Allport (1897-1967), suggested, "if a person's traits are known, it is possible to predict how he or she will respond to various environmental stimuli" (1937). In other words, "traits will guide their behavior, because people can respond to the world only in terms of their traits" (Hergenhahn, 1990, p.182).

Allport believed people reacted differently to the same stimulus because different traits are involved. Or, as Allport (1961) explained, "The same fire that melts the butter hardens the egg" (p.72). While Allport believed each individual was unique because of their unique combination of traits, he believed the traits were basically fixed.

Stage Models of Adult Development

Numerous theorists (Piaget, Freud, Erikson, and Levinson) have argued for stage (or predictable change) models of development.

Erik Erikson (1902-1990) was once a follower of Freud. An important contribution of his theory is the epigenetic principle. According to Erikson (1980), the concept of epigenesis has its roots in the biological principle that development of an embryo proceeds according to a predetermined plan. With this plan each organ has its own time of maximum growth and development. If the parts develop properly they will eventually form an integrated, functional whole. In psychosocial terms, Erikson translated the epigenetic principle to say the demands of one stage lay the groundwork for the resolution of future tasks.

Erikson is best known in developmental psychology for his model of eight stages of development. His sixth and seventh stages, concerning young and middle adulthood, provide a foundation for the current stage models of adult development.

In 1978 Daniel Levinson, a social psychologist at Yale University, published his book entitled Seasons of a Man's Life. The book greatly expanded Erikson's seventh stage of adult development (generativity versus stagnation), but emphasized the crisis nature of the midlife stage.

Levinson sees human development not as a continuous process but as alternating stages of structure-building and structure-changing. This concept of alternating periods of stability and instability is clearly Piagetian. Levinson's concept of the "lifecycle" suggests an underlying pattern to human growth similar to Erikson's epigenetic principle. Levinson believes that individuals proceed in an age-related series of emotional and physical transitions (Levinson, 1978).

The stage theorists (Gould, 1978; Levinson, 1978) believe the midlife transition is the great transition. The focus of this stage is on the loss of youth and faltering physical powers that had been taken for granted. Additionally, there is a yearning for individualness and undividedness. No matter what one's doing or has done, parts of oneself have been suppressed. The major task of this stage is the

reintegration of one's ignored parts.

The stage theorists assure us that a period of stability will follow the turbulent midlife transition. Like Freud's stage theory, they see adults moving out of the midlife transition like clockwork; unfinished business or not. In other words, midlife transition is *just* a stage (like the terrible-two's), adults grow out of it.

Interactional Models of Adult Development

Advocates of the interactional (or flexible-contextual) models, including me, argue that the first two models are too simplistic. While most two-year olds have similar developmental issues and exhibit similar behaviors, a forty-year old professional athlete has little in common with a forty-year old heart surgeon.

Historically, Carl Jung was one of the first writers to offer a model of midlife development that was not based on assumptions of stability or predictability. Jung believed fundamental changes regarding adult development occurred at about forty. He saw evidence of men becoming more warm and caring while women became more tough-minded and "masculine." But, Jung "understood individual adult development as a product of both psychological processes and cultural forces" (Miesel, 1991, p.52).

Bernice Neugarten, and other researchers at the University of Chicago, "point out that their studies show that chronological age is an increasingly unreliable indicator of what people will be like at various points in their development" (Miesel, 1991, p.60). I agree with Neugarten when she says, "the scenarios and schedules of our lives are so varied that it is virtually impossible to talk about a single timetable for adult development" (Miesel, 1991, p.60).

Nancy Schlossberg (1987) says her research indicates that chronological age is one of the least important factors in the differences between how people experience transitions. Schlossberg says, "because the adult years are so variable, we cannot assume that particular transitions will necessarily occur at specific ages" (p.75). She believes how the individual views the transition, and his or her resources for dealing with it, determines the positive or negative effect

of the transition.

The supporters of interactional models argue that what was true for Levinson's group (a particular cohort) will not necessarily be true for another cohort born into a time with different economic and social challenges. Interactional models are built upon the interactionist belief that the individual effects, and is effected by, his or her environment.

Since I am a believer in this interactionist approach, I took a serious look at Knowles' work in developing proper environments for self-directed adult learning.

Self-Directed Learning

Knowles (1975) emphasized the importance of developing techniques that would create environments conducive to maximizing self-directed learning (SDL). The following points in Knowles (1975) work bear repeating here: "Individuals who take the initiative in learning, learn more (p.14), and "Self-directed learning assumes that the human being grows in capacity and needs to be self-directing as an essential component in maturing" (p.20).

While I found Knowles' work to be lucid and inspiring, I had two reservations. Based on my own teaching experience, I realized, (1) some intelligent adults are not psychologically equipped to succeed at self-directed learning, and (2) some subject matters (i.e. accounting) are not appropriate for SDL. I had taught accounting for several years, and I had never met a learner who had succeeded in a "self-directed," distance-learning accounting course. These learners needed and welcomed teacher-direction with open arms.

The work of Huey B. Long addresses the psychological aspects of SDL. Long (1989) depicts the successful self-directed learner as having the following characteristics: 1) self-confidence, 2) self-awareness, 3) self-reflectiveness, 4) a strong goal orientation, and 5) an aptitude for systematic procedures. Obviously, all adult learners do not exhibit these characteristics.

In a book chapter entitled Challenges in the Study and Practice of Self-Directed Learning, Long (1991) advocates developing a

theoretical framework for SDL based on an interactionist theory that provides for multiple variables. Long prefers to speak in terms of degrees of self-direction, rather than in an all-or-nothing approach (p.15).

In his 1991 chapter, Long presents an illustration of his model with pedagogical control on the horizontal axis and psychological control on the vertical axis (p.22). This illustration, divided into four quadrants, identifies situations where SDL is, and is not, appropriate based on the psychological make-up of the individual.

In a 1990 article in the International Journal of Lifelong Education, Long argued that psychological control is the necessary and sufficient cause for SDL. He pointed out that the over-zealous promotion of SDL resulted in a primary emphasis on techniques while neglecting the psychological variable.

Another work that informs my own is Cyril Houle's (1961) The Inquiring Mind. In his book, Houle identified three orientations that lead adults into educational activities. Those who use education as a means of accomplishing fairly clear-cut objectives were labeled goal-oriented (p.15). Those who take part because they find meeting other adults and remaining active enjoyable were called activity-oriented (pp.19-24). And third, those who seek knowledge for its own sake were labelled learning-oriented (p.16). Houle emphasized that he pictured these groups as "three circles which overlap at their edges...but the central emphasis of each subgroup is clearly discernable" (p.16).

The reader should note that Houle's (1961) work was with non-degree seeking adults in not-for-credit courses. Generalizing his findings to the degree-seeking adults in my study must be done with caution.

While Houle's book was based on his qualitative study, including the interviews of twenty-two adult learners, other researchers (Boshier, 1971; Burgess, 1971; Sheffield, 1964) used quantitative studies to lend support to Houle's findings. Houle's (1961) model of learner orientations still appears unsurpassed for simplicity and eloquence.

In addition to Houle's work on learner orientations, there is abundant work on motivations for mid-career adults returning to formal education (Entine, 1967; Miesel, 1991). These studies indicate that career advancement is the leading motivator. Clearly, these career goals can be subsumed under Houle's goal-orientation.

While there is abundant literature on motivators for mid-career adults returning to formal education, there is little literature on changes in learner orientations during formal programs. One study dealing with changes in orientations is that of Goss, Neely, Beitler, and Runge (1996). They found that the initial motivations of the mid-career adults to enroll in SDL was "more instrumentally directed than it was self-actualizing...a kind of *credentialling* important to their professional fields" (p.5). For these mid-career adults, the program was initially seen as a means to an end, but during the process "professional orientations gave way to recognition that learning has value in and of itself" (p.12).

I believe the findings of Goss, et al. (1996) are especially exciting when considering the transformative potential of SDL. While exciting, we must not attempt to apply SDL in an uncritical manner.

MY RESEARCH DESIGN

Since my inquiry was rooted in my own experience, I sought out a research method that would utilize and clarify my own perceptions. Among the numerous qualitative research methods available are those of the phenomenologists.

While phenomenologists believe the meaning of an experience is unique to each individual, they assume there is an essence or essences to shared experience. So then it follows, the research method of the phenomenologist is to analyze and compare the experiences of different people to identify the essences of the phenomenon (Patton, 1990, p.70).

Among the phenomenological methods, I chose a heuristic approach. The uniqueness of heuristic research is its utilization of the

personal experience and insights of the researcher. Patton (1990) makes this distinction clear by describing the two inquiry focuses in the form of overarching questions. The phenomeno- logical researcher asks, "What is the structure and essence of experience of this phenomenon for these people?" (p.69). The heuristic researcher asks, "What is my experience of this phenomenon and the essential experience of others who also experience this phenomenon?" (p.71).

In heuristic research, verification is enhanced by sharing findings with the research participants. Seeking the participants' assessment of comprehensiveness and accuracy can yield additional input and insight for the researcher (Moustakas, 1990).

I discussed heuristic research and my experience with mid-career education at length in an earlier work (Beitler, 1997).

My particular heuristic study involved two sets of interviews. I interviewed learners who were currently enrolled in two self-directed graduate programs: masters-level learners at the Vermont College of Norwich University and doctoral-level learners at The Union Institute. Additionally, I interviewed graduates of these programs in an attempt to understand their perceptions of SDL. Each interview was approximately one and one-half hours in length.

In the first round of interviews, I used a general interview guide approach (Patton, 1990, p.280) focusing on a set of general issues to be explored with each participant. My second round of interviews was more informal and conversational in nature. I was interested in knowing how learners articulate their perspective, and in getting their unique educational "stories." At the conclusion of the research, I mailed my written depictions to each participant for their verification of the story.

FINDINGS

My findings indicate that there are basically three motivations for adults to enroll in formal educational programs: 1) learning for career advancement or training needs, 2) learning for interpersonal

effectiveness, and 3) learning for the sake of learning.

The majority of my participants were motivated by their career goals. Two participants in particular exemplified goal-oriented learning--Cheryl and Janis. For these individuals formal education was seen as a way to a better life.

Cheryl, an African-American computer expert, was raised in a poor neighborhood in a large city. She saw corporate America as providing the most opportunities for her. Cheryl's goal was to develop the skills needed to succeed in the corporate world.

Janis, who divorced after a long marriage, did not go to college after high school. As a teenager in high school, she said she was "not career-driven," but focused on the "social aspects" of school. But after working for General Motors for awhile, Janis decided she needed "more education" to advance. She proceeded to complete A.A., B.S., and M.S. degrees.

Both Cheryl and Janis are highly successful. Both Cheryl and Janis are currently enrolled in Ph.D. programs in their fields (Management Information Systems and Marketing, respectively). And, both described a recently developing interest in philosophy, psychology, creativity enhancement, and other non-career subjects.

Most of my participants described an interest in studying interpersonal skills after they learned the technical skills required by their respective professions. Their interest was goal-oriented (career motivated) in the sense of being a goal to enhance a particular skill. Their interest was learning-oriented (develop- mentally motivated) in the sense of being a desire to learn more about the world in which they lived.

Two of my participants exemplified learning for the sake of learning--Anita and David. Anita, a high-ranking administrator in the Federal Government's Department of Housing and Urban Development, has always had an interest in environmental studies and writing. She currently is completing an M.A. in Environmental Studies and Communication. Anita describes the masters program as a pleasure. She says, "I would have taken this program even if there were no career possibilities, which indeed there may not be."

David, a medical doctor specializing in internal medicine, recently completed an M.A. program in Russian Studies. In addition to rigorous medical training at the University of Chicago School of Medicine, David has pursued a host of informal learning projects. One of his current projects is building an airplane for his personal use. Another of David's interests is in Russian language and culture. After studying Russian for many years on his own, or in small groups he organized, David enrolled in an M.A. program at Norwich University. David epitomizes the concept of a lifelong learner.

My findings indicate that mid-career adults have various educational needs. Some are struggling with careers. Some are struggling with relationships. Some are struggling with the meaning of life. Some don't seem to be struggling at all--at least not currently. While this group is fascinatingly diverse, I can still offer the following insights about mid-career adults in education.

Mid-career learners have informed opinions and knowledge based on a wealth of experience. They want to be respected for what they have to say. They want to learn from the teacher, or expert, but in an equalitarian setting where they find mutual respect. They want teachers to articulate clearly defined goals and to provide feedback. They want teachers to be knowledgeable about their subjects and related subjects, plus show "humanness" in responding to learner needs. They want to be directed to appropriate resources. They want to "focus" on what is important to them. They want teachers to be empathetic, patient, and caring. They want to learn in an environment where they feel "safe," where they can make mistakes. They want teachers who tell them they are "confident in them." They want teachers who are willing to give extra time and attention when it is necessary. They want teachers with character as well as credentials. They want to integrate theory with practice. They want teachers who honor them for being different; who never embarrass them. They want teachers who inspire, encourage, and make learning fun. They want teachers to pace themselves to accommodate learner needs. They want teachers to offer emotional support and to be available outside of the classroom.

Most importantly, they want teachers who care about them as individuals and want to see them succeed. Frankly, they want the learning environment to focus on them.

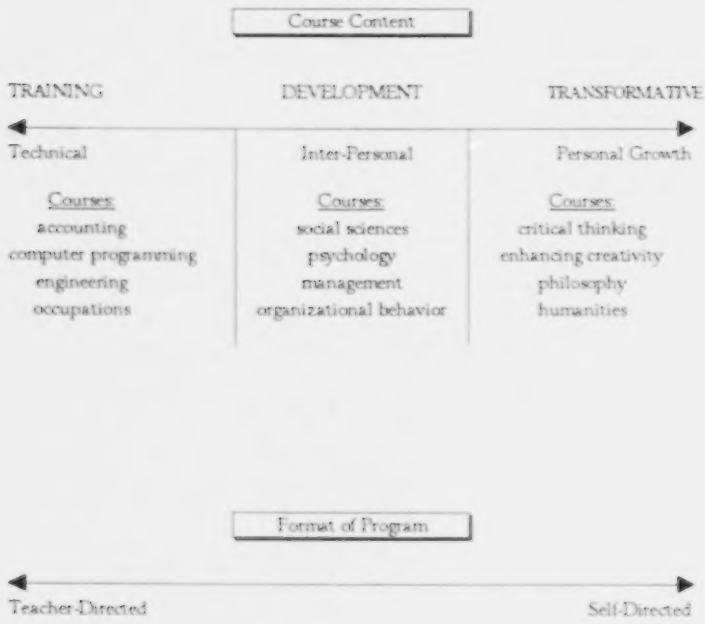
Are mid-career learners expecting too much? I believe they are not. After all, the primary focus in an educational setting should not be the teacher, or even the subject matter; the primary focus should be the needs of the learner.

Studying the participants' educational stories, reveals two important things about adult learning that are not adequately discussed in the literature. First, mid-career adults have dramatically different learning needs. Adult educators, CPE facilitators, and HRD professionals must meet adults at the learners' point of need.

Second, my findings reveal a *continuum of educational needs*. There are needs for technical training, inter-personal development, and personal growth through transformative learning (as described by Mezirow, 1978, 1991). All learners have all three needs--it is the emphasis that varies throughout adulthood. The job of the educator is to accommodate the current need of the learner.

On the next page I offer my depiction of *The Continuum of Educational Needs*. It is important to note that different teaching methods are appropriate at different points on the continuum.

THE CONTINUUM OF EDUCATIONAL NEEDS



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CONCLUSION

My findings lend considerable support to the SDL advocates who argue in favor of the self-directed design for adult and continuing education. While I agree in general, I have some serious reservations. The self-directed learning educational design is clearly inappropriate for young adults who have little knowledge of the subject matter they are beginning to study. Self-directed learning is also potentially dangerous in technical fields (i.e. accounting, engineering, or medicine), where a well-defined body of knowledge must be mastered by the learner. In these technical fields, I believe it is possible for learners to obtain a *mis-education* in which they arrive at conclusions that are not supported by the tested theory of practicing professionals. Teacher-direction is required in technical training.

Perhaps my most important finding, because it is not discussed in the current literature, is the discovery of a *continuum of educational needs*. I believe an understanding of the dynamic nature of the needs of mid-career adults is essential to being effective as an adult educator, CPE facilitator, or HRD professional. My findings indicate that there are basically three motivations for adult learning: goal-oriented learning (revealed in my study as career advancement goals or training needs), learning for interpersonal effectiveness, and learning for the sake of learning. While an individual adult learner may exhibit one particular motivation, and appear at a certain point on the continuum, the educator must realize that this situation is dynamic and subject to inevitable change. By depicting adult learning needs on a continuum we, as adult educators, can understand that our teaching style must be adjusted to match the needs of the learner.

I should caution that my Continuum of Educational Needs does not imply that one educational motivation is *better* than another. Likewise, one teaching style or educational design (self-directed or teacher-directed) is not superior to another. The issue here is *appropriateness*. It is the responsibility of adult educators and educational institutions to adjust teaching styles and program designs to be appropriate for the subject matter being taught and to the

educational needs of the learner.

The two works that are most supportive of my own are Houle's (1961) and Long's (1991). My work clearly revealed at least two of Houle's learning orientations--learning for the sake of learning and goal-oriented learning (seen in my degree-seeking participants as career goals). I believe career goals are properly subsumed under Houle's goal-orientation.

Long's work on the psychological aspects of SDL can not be overemphasized in my work. Long appears to be the first to recognize that the successful application of SDL is not simply a matter of creating an environment. His psychological model points out that SDL is not appropriate for some individuals. I would add that SDL is not appropriate for some subject matters. Additionally, the idiosyncratic and dynamic nature of adult learners behooves adult educators to develop a repertoire of teaching skills to meet various learner needs. Long is correct in speaking of self-direction in terms of degree, instead of all-or-nothing.

CLOSING COMMENTS

At the beginning of this study, I was puzzled as to what caused my personal transformation in learning motivation--was it the self-directed program design, or was it simply a natural progression in my adult development? I learned that the self-directed format of the program enabled me to meet my unique educational needs (for personal growth). If I had needed education that was more training-oriented, the self-directed format would have been less effective.

Additionally, I was concerned about my teaching style or *styles*. Could I justify using SDL for mid-career adults in some classes and teacher-directed learning in other classes? The answer here is yes. The proper question is not--what is the superior style? The proper question is--what is the appropriate degree of self-direction, or teacher-direction, for the individual learner and the subject matter being learned.

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